

Obama increases US military presence in Australia and Asia

By James Cogan
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US President Barack Obama has used his brief state visit to Australia over the past 24 hours to underscore that his administration's aggressive intervention into the Asia-Pacific region is aimed at undercutting China's growing influence. The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard has unconditionally aligned itself with the US as the means for advancing Australian corporate and strategic interests within the region.

At a press conference yesterday evening, Obama and Gillard announced that the American military will boost its operations in the north and west of the Australian continent. The country's Northern Territory and its capital city Darwin, which is closer to Indonesia than Australia's major southern cities, will be developed into a major US staging base.

From next year, 200 to 250 US marines will train for six months of the year in the Northern Territory. By 2016-2017, the training will involve an entire marine air-ground task force of 2,500 troops. The rotation of forces in and out of the territory will be the justification for the establishment of large-scale logistical facilities and supply depots that could support a far bigger deployment.

The Tindal air base to the south of Darwin will be regularly used by the US Air Force, with more frequent training in the Northern Territory by B-52 long-range bombers. US warships and submarines will make increased visits to Western Australian naval ports as they intensify their operations in the Indian Ocean. The agreements, while widely anticipated, mark a major escalation in American-Australian military cooperation within the framework of the 60-year-old ANZUS military alliance.

Only four countries were briefed prior to the announcement: New Zealand, which is the other

member of ANZUS with Australia and the US; Indonesia, which will see far greater US military activity in its waters and airspace; India, with which Washington is steadily building military ties; and China. The US also reportedly informed Japan and South Korea, its two main military allies in North East Asia. Briefings are now being given to other countries in Asia, as well as to the Pacific Island states, which are under intense pressure from Washington and Canberra not to allow Chinese military access to their territories.

There is no doubt in the region that China is the target of the increased US military operations from Australia. In his comments at the press conference, Obama declared that the US welcomed the rise of China, but then added that "with their rise comes responsibility," which included playing "by the rules" of being a world power. The remarks highlight Washington's determination to ensure that China abides by the "rules" as laid down by the US—that is, by a world order dominated by American economic and strategic interests.

The deployment of American troops to northern and western Australia, along with a heightened naval and airforce presence, will put the US in a better position to dominate the critical sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, through which a large proportion of world trade passes. This includes the majority of China's exports and imports, and the Middle Eastern oil supplies that are essential to the functioning of the Chinese economy.

The *Australian's* commentator Greg Sheridan wrote that Darwin was "a kind of axis from which US forces can swing into the Pacific or Indian Oceans." The *New York Times* noted that the decision would "restore a substantial American footprint near the South China Sea, a major commercial route—including for American

exports—that has been roiled by China’s disputed claims of control.”

During an address to the Australian parliament today, Obama made clear that the winding down of troop deployments in Iraq would enable the US to “make our presence in the Asia-Pacific our top priority.” While overall military spending would be reduced, he stressed that American military activities in Asia would be strengthened. The agreements with Australia, he said, would send a clear signal throughout the region that the “United States is a Pacific power and we are here to stay.” China, Obama asserted, had to accept “freedom of navigation” in the areas of the South China Sea it claims as its territory.

The ability to militarily dominate the Asia-Pacific is inseparable from the economic agenda of the US ruling class. Obama referred to the “broader purpose” of the agreements with Australia. He told the Australian parliament that the US would fight in the Asian region for countries to “play by the rules” in terms of trade access, intellectual property and currency valuations. The US, he declared, would “speak candidly to Beijing about the importance of upholding international norms.”

The announcements in Australia are clearly intended to influence the agenda, tone and outcome of the East Asian Summit this weekend in Bali, Indonesia. This year’s summit is the first to be attended by a US president. It will be the arena for the assertion of the Obama administration’s demands in the region against China.

The Obama administration is pressuring Asian countries to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trading bloc, whose conditions of entry benefit American transnationals. The bloc particularly seeks to enforce subservience to US claims over intellectual property, and dictates the dismantling of any measures deemed protectionist, including preferential treatment for state-owned companies.

More broadly, the constant US insistence that China revalue its currency by as much as 20 to 25 percent means that the Chinese regime would have to undermine the foundations of its cheap labour economy. Companies would have a direct incentive to shift manufacturing and other activities elsewhere, including to the United States where workers’ wages and conditions are being systematically cut to or below

levels in many Asian countries

The US agenda would have a devastating economic impact on China and other countries in the region. It is predicated on the belief that China and other Asian powers will simply submit due to the dominant role of the US military in the region and its ability to cut off access to essential raw materials, including energy from the Middle East and Africa, along with iron ore, coal and natural gas from Australia.

There are already signs, however, that China will not simply acquiesce. The *Peoples Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Beijing regime, bluntly declared in an editorial: “Australia surely cannot play China for a fool. It is impossible for China to remain detached no matter what Australia does to undermine its security... If Australia uses its military bases to help the US harm Chinese interests, then Australia itself will be caught in the crossfire”.

The US decision to base troops in northern Australia also prompted sharp criticism from Indonesia. Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa nervously warned that it could trigger “a vicious circle of tension and mistrust in the region.” He told a press conference: “The most likely scenario is China over the next several years feeling challenged by the reaction of the United States and its allies and partners and taking further measures to strengthen its own capabilities. That’s the inherent danger of situations of this sort, and the challenge for all of us is to make sure that doesn’t escalate out of control.”

Natalegawa’s statements reflect the dilemma that confronts every ruling elite in the region, including in Australia, in the face of the rising US-Chinese tensions. They are all economically entwined with China, which is the largest trading partner of most countries. At the same time, the US remains the dominant military power and each country is under intense pressure to side with Washington against Beijing. Obama’s Asian tour underscores the growing danger that these rivalries will escalate into an open confrontation, with calamitous consequences for the working class.

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